

Old local railroad beds on track for new mission

Proposal would make walking trails out of East Side rights of way once used by industry.

EILEEN GODIN Times Leader Correspondent

WILKES-BARRE -- Abandoned railroad beds created when coal was king might be given a new lease on life thanks to a proposal to convert them to walking paths.

The Wilkes-Barre proposed trail and greenway expansion master plan, unveiled Tuesday night at Wilkes University, will use neglected and abandoned railroad beds to create trails connecting existing trails throughout Wilkes-Barre, and Plains, Hanover and Wilkes-Barre townships.

Who will foot the bill and when the trails will be developed have not been determined yet.

But having trails and greenways can benefit Wilkes-Barre and neighboring municipalities by drawing in residents as well as tourism, said Janet Sweeney, project manager with the Northeast Pennsylvania Environmental Council.

She knows of studies showing trail systems can generate tourism and increase spending in local businesses.

Plan details show the existing Luzerne County Levee trail would connect to a proposed Carey Avenue connector trail, which then would lead from Hanover Township into Wilkes-Barre's planned D&L Black Diamond trail and end at the old train station off Wilkes-Barre Boulevard.

Ted Kross, of the city Department of Health, said plans to transform the old station into a welcome center for Wilkes-Barre would be a convenient area for trails to meet.

The master plan contains several proposed and planned trails. George White, design consultant, said planned trails were previously recommended and proposed trails are new to the overall plan. Proposed trails would include: D&L Black Diamond, Ridge to River Trail, Luzerne County National Recreation Trail, Parsons Trail, South Sherman Street Trail and Bikeway, East End Trail and Bikeway, Plains Trail, Carey Avenue Connector Trail, and the Newtown Trail.

In February, city officials adopted the proposed master plan. Kross said the city had given \$25,000, which it received through a grant from the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, to cover research and consulting fees. Other funding for research and planning was provided by the Anthracite Scenic Trail Association, the Delaware and Leigh National Heritage Corridor, the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership, and the Edith Reynolds Trust.

White said the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources funded the majority of the study. Details on state money spent were not available Tuesday.

White said he proposes to use about 10 to 15 miles of unused rail lines as possible trail routes.

In some locations the trail might "piggyback along low-use (active) lines," he said.

White examined railroad maps dating back to 1892 to identify possible railroad beds, and then he went looking for them. The low grade of railroad beds will provide an even surface to walk or bike ride.

"There is a spider web of old railroad lines," he said. "The availability of the railroad beds made the project possible."

The use of the old beds will not affect any future use of the current railroad system.



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He explained that years ago there were separate rail lines used for a specific purpose such as for coal, freight, passengers, timber and ice harvesting.

“Some have not been used for 100 years,” White said.

The large project does not have a determined timeline yet. Kross estimates it could take five to 10 years before the entire project is completed.

White said identifying possible trails and rolling out the proposed plan to gain public support is the first step. The second, he said, is finding funding to make the plan become a reality.